DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 905 JC 860 075

AUTHOR Engler, William H.
TITLE New Jersey Community College General Education Regulations.
SPONS AGENCY Princeton Univ., NJ. Mid-Career Fellowship Program.
PUB DATE Sep 85
NOTE 13p.; In: Current Issues for the Community College: Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University (JC 860 072).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Board of Education Policy; Board of Education Role; *College Curriculum; *Community Colleges; Curriculum Development; *Educational Legislation; *General Education; Government School Relationship; Program Descriptions; *School District Autonomy; *State Legislation; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *New Jersey

ABSTRACT

The New Jersey Department of Higher Education (DHE) adopted a revised set of General Education Regulations for community colleges in April 1983. The stated purposes of the regulations were to cause students to cease taking a disproportionate number of courses in a specific discipline; to require general education courses for certificate programs; and to facilitate articulation between county colleges and state colleges. The unstated purpose of the change in regulations was to extend DHE authority over the community colleges. The new regulations actually discouraged interdisciplinary offerings and innovations by imposing a specific curricular pattern. Mercer Community College responded by suggesting steps for the future to improve the general education programs despite the permanence of the DHE distribution program, including writing across the curriculum activities, pilot interdisciplinary offerings, forums focusing attention upon the connection between technology and general societal issues, and workshops for the college's Curriculum Committee regarding general education. (LAL)

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NEW JERSEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE GENERAL EDUCATION REGULATIONS

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William H. Engler
Humanities Department
Mercer County Community College

JC 860 075

Considering the volume of discourse on the plight of general education at institutions of higher learning, participation by the public community colleges has been relatively thin and irresponsibly tardy. In 1978, general education in this sector had been thought to have "been on the defensive, if not on the decline"(Cantor 51). Similarly, a study completed in 1979 revealed that 54% of the community colleges surveyed indicated that no change in general education was likely to occur on their campuses, and that 15% predicted decreased emphasis (Hammons). In 1982, Patricia Cross declared that "General Education in the community college is neither more secure nor less than it was thirty years ago, neither more clarified nor more blurred, neither more important or less"(14). That same year, O'Banion and Shaw declared that"despite their well-deserved reputation for innovation, community colleges generally have been unsuccessful in designing programs of general education different from those of the senior institutions"(63). Somehow the ferment, the plethora of conferences, the episodes of public self-accusations as well as the fervent proclamations of new commitment to broader educational experiences have had limited impact upon the community college. A perusal of the literature produced by the Project on General Education Models corroborates this relative inactivity. There have been, to be sure, spectacular exceptions, most notably the highly publicized effort at Miami-Dade (Lukenbill and McCabe). Even the celebrated DOORS Program adopted by some community colleges (and subsequently dropped by New Jersey's Essex County Community College) was initially developed at Illinois Central College (Forum 8).

For a variety of reasons, including anxiety about having been left behind, the community college sector is beginning to deal with the issues more directly, albeit pessimistically. Despite calls for a committment to reform and self-study noted at a national workshop on general education in March, 1984 (Rabb), the participants were all too keenly aware of the obstacles and pitfalls in the path of reform. They were familiar with the issues, eg. the lack of clear focus, the need for integration, the creep of specialization, etc., but it is as if the pull and tug of the battle- zone has made their good intentions both wary and tentative.

The question asked by Rose Channing, President of Middlesex Community College, at this same workshop, as to whether the public or students appreciated the value of general education, betrayed an ever growing hyper-sensitivity toward the marketplace among New Jersey colleges. Snakebitten by rapidly falling enrollment and ever tighter budgetary restictions, the community colleges in the state of New Jersey are inclined, at best, to stand pat on general education, and continue to use their energies to penetrate the special interests market. All of these colleges have enlarged their community and continuing education services often at the expense of competing with more traditional general education offerings. It is, then, fair to say that a fresh effort to regenerate general education has not been in the offing. In this light it was not suprising that the Department of Higher Education would seek to fill the vacuum as yet another way to expand its influence over the community college sector. Rushing in where angels feared to tread, the Board of Higher Education, in April

1983, adopted a revised set of General Education Regulations.

The Regulations

The stated purposes of these regulations are threefold: First, that students cease taking advantage of the existing regulations by taking a disproportionate number of courses in a specific discipline. Further, certificate programs had to require general education courses, and finally, that articulation between the county colleges and the state colleges had not bene facilitated by tighter regulations. Of the first, one may only assume that the DHE had observed excesses and sought to eliminate them by ensuring broader educational experiences. The second and third purposes are in line with the DHE's policy to promote vertical articulation through standardization. The assumption underlying this effort is that each level is to a large extent, preparation for the next. The community college is viewed in this manner as a layer in a hierarchy, rather than a distinct entity with its own unique identity. The fact that ever decreasing numbers of students matriculate in transfer programs makes this treatment highly questionable. The "stronger articulation" line is therefore, a cover for the DHE's extension of authority.

The main body of the document focuses the distribution of courses within distinct categories or areas of general education. The existing number of general education credits required for degrees still pertain, but now they must be "spent" within four areas: communications, mathematics and science (including computer science), social sciences, and humanities. These categories had been proceeded by a statement that the distribution might be

satisfied by "such other courses as may be specified in the college catalog which emphasize the acquisition of knowledge, comprehension and evaluation of ideas ...," the gist of which suggests opportunities for interdisciplinary courses housed outside the grouping. No such inference is, however, supported by the rest of the document. General education courses had to be placed among the four "portions". In addition, students are expected to take an "array" of courses under each heading, thereby ensuring both breadth and depth.

Two other requirments are of interest. First, certificate programs would have to include six to nine general education credits, in keeping with the policy of vertical articulation, and finally the stipulation that "a general education course shall be taught only by faculty qualified in the discipline." Here the DHE reaches into the hiring and coverage practices of the colleges, but more significantly provides legal support for an orderly Reduction In Force. This regulation would prevent "switching" into disciplines, as had been encouraged in the years when the community colleges ate at the horn of plenty.

On the whole there are no suprises in this document. The distribution list matches that already in place for the state colleges. Further, the categories represent an inoffensive, consensus approach to distribution. This point of view does, however, reinforce debatable assumptions about the efficacy of the distribution method. It assumes that general education experiences are best encouraged within discrete disciplines, and that every educated person knows what they are. By enforcing distribution, the new regulations will discourage new arrangements including

cross-disciplinary offerings, and different ways to provide the sense of connectedness not addressed in the stated directives. The limitations of the distribution system have been amply identified and assessed in any number of publications and forums. As Gaff notes "distribution requirements have spawned the very problems that current reform efforts are seeking to overcome" (51). The promising approaches designed to deal with the fragmentation of the traditional distribution method, noted in the Princeton workshop would not find fertile soil in the dank tarn of the Jersey Meadowlands.

Even more disturbing than the DHE's imposition of a specific curricular pattern, is its insatiable appetite for control. In order to complete its effort of making eveything symmetrical within a neatly organized hierarchy, all the DHE had to do was to find a way measuring the effects of the curriculum. That is exactly what the Department recommended when T. Edward Hollander dropped the other shoe in December, 1984. In a memorandum to the Board of Higher Education concerning the recent NIE Report on Higher Education, Hollander continued his bold foray into the business of all the colleges in the state. Although most of the publicity surrounding the NIE Report emphasized the NIE's concern over the plight of the teaching and study of the humanities, Hollander used the Report as a springboard for his own pet concerns. Only one brief comment about the humanities is buried in the bowels of this scattershot document and even that ended up as a recommendation "that the Fund for the Improvement of Collegiate Educatioin expand its objectives to encompass the development of comprehensive undergraduate core curricula" (9). The

heart of this memorandum, however, rests in a series of recommendations for assessing student achievment including a request that the colleges and universities report back to the Board "on the feasibility of instituting a statewide sophomore testing program" (16). Hollander is seeking closure on this last measure, so the county colleges will soon have to gear up for the inevitable. In a way, the regulations for general education, and the regulations for expanded testing are part of the same pattern of state inteference. The county colleges will have to find ways to compromise the state examination, or end up having their curricula fit the test rather than the other way around.

Mercer's Reaction

The presidents of Mercer County Community College have often handled major changes in policy at the DHE, by incorporating them into college policy well before the state has taken final action. By promulgating subtle, self-serving versions of the anticipated changes, Mercer then assumes the leadership role among the community colleges, while also establishing a cooperative relationship with the DHE. Mercer's handling of the General Education Regulations was no exception to this strategy. Fully a year prior to the formulation of the DHE's regulations, Mercer's Dean for Academic Affairs recommended slight alterations of the college's general education distribution requirements based upon a definition endorsed by the Academic Officers Association of New Jersey which he himself had written. Mercer's Curriculum Committee adopted some of the recommendations, including the splitting of the liberal arts category into two: social sciences and

humanities. When the DHE's regulations landed on the county colleges, Mercer was in the unique position of having to make only minimal adjustments in some of its programs. A humanities or a social science course had to be added to seven degree programs while an English course had to be added to six certificate programs. As a result of these additional credits, some programs technically exceeded the maximum number of credits permitted by Mercer, and consequently, the college is seeking a waiver from the DHE which would permit the reduction of general education credits in a few technological programs. All in all, Mercer's distribution approach was not only inviolate, but also validated by Hollander's official stamp of approval.

A review of trends in Mercer's educational programs shows feverish curricular activity in both occupational and techn logical courses of study. This has tended to increase the pressure toward specialization by those who coordinate discipline activities. To its credit, the college has sought to temper this development by establishing minimum literacy requirements in all courses, by supporting efforts to promote writing across the disciplines and by adding an additional three credits of English for all AAS students. In addition, the Curriculum Committee reviewed the the general education course list and removed offerings which were clearly occupational. Apart from these activities, however, no person or forum has ever raised serious questions about the function or format of general education. Occasionally, an irate member of the faculty in technology will rail against the need for students to take a social science course, but no one has ever raised the need for coherence, fusion,

or diminished fragmentation.

The distribution system is general education at Mercer, and any other arrangement unimaginable. The trick for most faculty is to find a way to make the system work for them, that is to say, to buttress enrollment in their own courses. The faculty only become interested in general education when they want to place new courses on the general education course list, or when the Curriculum Committee threatens to excice someone's course. The distribution system and the approved courses are the result of a complicated skein of political accomodations, common sense, traditional practices and finally arrangements brought about by an ever changing academic management structure. As a result of all the above, proponents of courses in areas which have been traditionally underrepresented in general education, eg. visual and performing arts are finding it almost impossible to gain acceptance. Requests on the part of these groups usually lead to a demand that the Curriculum Committee provide a definition of general education which would cover the existing list, and that is, of course, impossible. The committee usually avoids confrontation by referring to the distribution list as its definition. Furthermore, no one has ever developed an interdisciplinary offering for fear that it will fail to be placed on the general education course list because there isn't a category for it and therefore will wind up underenrolled. Mercer has the best of all possible worlds: it has a system which is carved in stone, approved by the state, and successfully resistant to most creative encroachments.

The Future at Mercer

Some positive steps may be taken to improve the general education program despite the permanence of the distribution system. Although the content of courses is regularly reviewed, there is little or no discussion about the potential for connections between the disciplines. Further, the wider goals of the college having to do with thinking and valuing are lost among the lists of facts the students are expected to master. A number of approaches might be encouraged to foster interrelatedness among the disciplines as well as techniques designed to develop the higher level cognitive skills a sound general education should address. Given the concern for falling enrollment and the potential for RIF, these approaches must be non-threatening, and if possible initiated by the faculty.

1. Writing Across the Curriculum activities should be continued. In addition, workshops along the lines of Thinking Across the Curriculum should be initiated. Bard College is currently sponsoring weekend workshops to encourage inquiry and questioning techniques in the classroom. Faculty might also share ways to stimulate logic and synthesis in class, in readings and on tests.

2. Pilot interdisciplinary offerings might be funded by the college's Instructional Development Committee. Courses in the Humanities (art, literature, history, philosophy) might be fused without disrupting the distribution system. Discussions and planning might be undertaken by faculty who might arrange to have their courses scheduled concurrently, eg. History of Western

Civilization and World Literature.

3. Forums and presentations by speakers focusing attention upon the connection between technology and general societal issues (eg. nursing and ethics, social effects of the computer) might be offered on a regular basis.

4. Workshops for the college's Curriculum Committee re general education should be undertaken without delay.

While none of the above is new or earthshaking, the combination might encourage thoughtfulness about the ways in which technique, content and organization might fulfil our goals for general education. If not, the Department of Higher Education will gladly do our thinking for us.

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